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## Gus Garcia, Austin's first elected Hispanic mayor, dies at 84

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Gus Garcia, an always straight-talking founding father of Mexican-American politics in Austin and the city's first elected Hispanic mayor, died early Monday morning at his Northeast Austin home, his family said.

Garcia, whose 40 years of civic and political ground breaking included being the first Hispanic member of the Austin Independent School District board and its first Hispanic board president, was 84.

Born in the border town of Zapata in 1934, Garcia served on the Austin City Council for more than 10 years and on the Austin school board for six years. His position as a school district trustee meant he also had a spot on Austin Community College's first board when the district created the college in the 1970s. Garcia is survived by his wife of 58 years, Marina, three sons and five grandchildren.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

“Gus was a first many times,” said state Sen. Kirk Watson, whose mayoral job Garcia won in a November 2001 special election, called after Watson stepped down to seek statewide office. “The word ‘historical’ gets thrown around too much, but it shouldn’t lose its meaning when you talk about someone who purposely was willing to put himself on the line over and over to show how things could be and should be done in Austin.

“He was in essence a loving and happy person. And those qualities translated into the way he led.”

### **In photos: Gus Garcia’s legacy in Austin.**

Upon learning of Garcia’s death, Austin Mayor Steve Adler posted on Twitter: “We feel a community-wide heavy heart as one of our greatest Austin giants moves on. ... I will miss my friend and teacher.”

To Paul Saldaña, a former Austin school district board member who served as Garcia’s council aide and mayoral chief of staff for about 10 years, Garcia was a father figure, a mentor and a demanding boss.

“If you were five minutes late to a 7:30 a.m. staff meeting, you would get a lecture,” said Saldaña, who is proud that he was sworn in to the school board by Garcia in 2014. “If he was in a good mood, you would get a lecture and a joke.”

Garcia, Saldaña and others said, was energized first to last by a drive for equal economic and educational opportunity for Hispanics and others disadvantaged by their beginnings, race or ethnicity.

“The minute the topic of education of low-income people came up, you could see he would sit up straight and have this passion and commitment to talk about it,” Saldaña said. “He saw himself in the young people who were struggling at home.”

Garcia’s own beginnings were humble as he grew up in a family he later described as “destitute.” Garcia’s family lived in tiny Zapata — where his father was a storekeeper — until he was 10. The Garcias then moved upriver to Laredo, where Gus quickly found that his early education at an unaccredited Zapata

school had not prepared him for academic challenges. (Garcia would say in a 2012 oral history that he basically didn't know English as he entered the seventh grade and that his slow start toward literacy dogged him for years.)

After an Army enlistment qualified him for the GI Bill, though, Garcia went on to graduate from the University of Texas in 1959 with an accounting degree. He became a certified public accountant in 1962 and after several years with a national firm, opened his own accounting shop in 1965.

In Austin, Garcia and his wife, raised in border communities that were 99 percent Hispanic, experienced open racial discrimination for the first time. They had trouble renting and, later, buying a home in certain parts of town; a landlord once hung up on Marina Garcia after hearing her surname, and real estate agents directed them to houses east of Interstate 35 or south of Ben White Boulevard. And Garcia was able to begin his accounting career only after one of his professors intervened with a potential employer. Even then, he said later, some clients balked at having their books kept by a person who was not white.

The Garcias bought a home in University Hills and later moved to their Coronado Hills home, near Reagan High School, where he died, surrounded by his family. That house is just a few miles south of the Gustavo L. "Gus" Garcia District Park and Recreation Center, which had its grand opening in April 2008.

### **'Accidental entry' into politics**

His early experiences in Austin led Garcia to what he would call his "accidental entry" into politics. When the Austin City Council in 1964 put together its first Human Relations Commission (later renamed the Human Rights Commission), the 21 initial appointments included just one Hispanic. Garcia was among a large group that came to a 1967 City Hall meeting to address that slight. When Council Member Dick Nichols waded through the crowd to pick four more Hispanic commission members, the young accountant was the last one chosen.

In January 1972, Garcia was little known in political circles when he filed for the school board's Place 7 seat. Richard Moya had already broken through the local political barrier faced by Hispanics, getting elected in 1970 to serve as Travis

County commissioner for Precinct 4, the county's heavily Hispanic southeast quadrant. But school board seats were elected at large at the time, meaning that Garcia had to garner a majority of votes from across Austin.

Garcia prevailed over an incumbent to win a six-year term. The political pioneering by Garcia and Moya would be followed in 1974 by Gonzalo Barrientos' election to an Austin-based seat in the Texas House, and in 1975, John Treviño became the first Hispanic member of the Austin City Council. In the wake of their political successes, the four men jokingly referred to themselves as the "brown machine."

### **A timeline of the significant political and civic moments in Gus Garcia's life.**

On the board, Garcia was a courtly but bracingly direct voice for integration in a school district struggling with historically segregated schools and operating under a busing order handed down by a federal court. He pushed for more Hispanics as teachers and administrators, and lobbied to bust up a purchasing system that awarded school district contracts overwhelmingly to white contractors.

In 1977, Garcia's fellow trustees named him board president, another first, and he began to speak regularly of the need for more Hispanic leaders in Austin, both in politics and in business. Education, he said, was the key to building a pipeline of such future leaders. In 1978, he declined to run for a second term on the board.

The school district in 2007 named a Northeast Austin middle school in his honor, then in 2014 converted it to an all-male campus now called the Gus Garcia Young Men's Leadership Academy. The sixth to eighth graders there are issued purple-and-white ties in a ceremony at the beginning of the school year, an accessory they must wear to class, and take a pledge that includes becoming a "Gus Garcia Man." That man was known for showing up from time to time.

"I go there and kids just love to talk to me because they thought I was dead," he told the Statesman in 2015. "The kids are mostly at-risk. That's what I wanted. If they were going to name a school for me I wanted it to be one with students that had challenges similar to me."

On Monday afternoon, Austin school district Superintendent Paul Cruz joined Sterlin McGruder, principal of Gus Garcia Young Men's Leadership Academy, to remember the school's namesake and the impact he had on its students.

"He set expectations of what this school was going to be, what the school was going to represent," said a tearful Cruz, who referred to Garcia as "alcalde," the Spanish word for mayor. "We work hard every day — Mr. McGruder, the teachers, the students, the staff — work hard every day to realize that vision and realize those expectations of excellence."

Garcia stepped away from politics in the 1980s to run his accounting business. He was drawn back into that world late that decade by a split in the Hispanic community regarding Robert Barnstone, who occupied the City Council Place 5 seat informally reserved for Hispanic candidates under an unwritten "gentlemen's agreement" that dated to the early 1970s. Barnstone, who also was from Laredo, had a white father and a Hispanic mother.

In 1991, Garcia ran against Gilbert Martinez and five other candidates (four of them Hispanic) — Barnstone, meanwhile, lost his bid for mayor — and eventually won the Place 5 seat in a runoff, receiving 51 percent of the vote. Dissolving his business to focus full-time on council duties, Garcia worked to expand facilities for East Austin, especially parks and recreation centers.

He also found himself in the middle of the environmental disputes that were dominating city politics at the time, casting a key swing vote in 1994 to appeal a lower court decision overturning the Save Our Springs water quality ordinance. The Texas Supreme Court later upheld the city's law.

### **A precedent-setting campaign**

Running in the 1997 City Council election, Garcia sought to break the confines of the gentleman's agreement that allotted only one seat to a Hispanic, campaigning for the Place 2 seat and hoping that another Hispanic would win his old seat. Garcia won. But in Place 5, Bill Spelman, who was white, defeated Manuel Zuniga in a runoff.

"I think there ought to be a protected seat for the Hispanics," Garcia told the American-Statesman in 1997, but he said he didn't want that sort of protection any longer. "I don't want to run with an advantage. If they elect me, I want them

to elect me for who I am.”

The current 11-member council, revamped under an amendment to the City Charter in 2014 to elect members by geographic districts rather than city-wide as with the old seven-member body, has three Hispanic members.

Former City Council Member Daryl Slusher, who served with Garcia for several years, was his colleague was “a master of the intangibles” who also brought “huge credibility” to discussions. As someone who could use his incisive accountant’s mind and sometimes salty wit to form coalitions and chip away at the city’s challenges, Garcia became “a major figure in Austin history,” Slusher said.

Longtime Austin political consultant David Butts, who assisted Garcia in his campaigns, remembered him Monday as a “true gentleman.”

“He got the big picture and, unlike a lot of politicians, he didn’t see it as one group pitted against another. ... He could see that a discrimination against one person was a discrimination against everyone,” Butts said.

After six years, Garcia had become a droll, senior presence on the City Council. Watson said that as he considered running for mayor in 1997, it was important to him that Garcia come along for another three-year term. The two men had a two-hour breakfast at El Sol y La Luna on South Congress in 1996, before Watson announced his candidacy.

“I told him that if I was going to do this, he was someone I wanted to be there,” Watson remembered. “He gave me his analysis of the politics, of the needs of our city and, maybe most importantly, his embrace of the people he would want me to serve. It was moving.

“I love the guy.”

A little more than four years later, Garcia moved into the mayor’s office in the old City Hall on West Eighth Street, and he retained the position until June 2003, when he retired from politics. Except, Saldaña said, Garcia wasn’t interested in the large ceremonial office that the mayors had traditionally occupied. Saldaña and several other aides were told by Garcia that they should occupy the high-ceilinged room.

"I don't need all that space," Saldana recalled Garcia saying.

Austin's new mayor instead set up shop down a narrow passage in a tiny office, a place where mayoral assistants formerly toiled.

Current Austin City Council Member Sabino "Pio" Renteria, who grew up in East Austin, said that Garcia in his early days as a politician had to fight perceptions of being something of an outsider.

"He wasn't from the neighborhood; he came in to go to the University of Texas," Renteria said. "But he had the heart that when people saw him, they knew he was sincere. And that's what made him so great. He had the vision. He knew, this is where we should be heading."

*American-Statesman reporters Katie Hall and Elizabeth Findell contributed to this story.*